

Case Study: Plymouth History Centre

Summary

Plymouth and West Devon Record Office has built a successful and diverse partnership to lead an ambitious new capital project for heritage in the South West.

Scope

Plymouth and West Devon Record Office faced an historic need for better accommodation to continue to meet TNA requirements for places of deposit. Previous capital project hadn't managed to get off the ground, but despite this, the archive has formed a strong new partnership to build a £21m History Centre for the city supported by a £12m HLF grant. A reorganisation placing the archive within Economic Development and clear political leadership in 2012 provided some of the renewed impetus for change. Looking forward the Mayflower 2020 anniversary gave a visionary milestone to rally regional support for a shared future for a range of heritage partners.

What's unique

Louisa Blight, Head of Collections at Plymouth City Council highlights three key challenges the partnership is meeting: First is the political challenge of unprecedented levels of scrutiny for the archive and reputational significance for the Council, which is magnified by the importance which their main funder, HLF, attaches to the project.

Secondly, developing the partnership itself is a governance and cultural challenge - not only does the project involve integration of archive and museum collections within the council, but also the independent, charitable organisations, South West Film and Television Archive and the South West Image Bank.

Thirdly, the local heritage community and users of the archive had shared with staff at the Council previous disappointments about potential capital projects and were understandably apprehensive about this new initiative. Louisa says: "We had to turn local pressure into enthusiasm and advocacy for the project."

Results

Although the new Centre is planned to open in 2018, the patient, incremental approach being taken to integrating such a diverse group of partners is paying dividends. The Council convened a Heritage Consortium Group which gave people a stake in the project while also planning other positive activities like a Heritage Festival. Unusually, the group was involved in presentations to HLF, which got excellent feedback from the funder.

Key learning points

Louisa says "The relationship with your funder is key. You need to invest time in building that relationship building to generate confidence that they're getting value for money and that you can deliver. With a long-term capital project like this, the partnership building is a process and a journey. The partnership may look very different when our building opens. You need to be relaxed about that".

For further information- <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/historycentre>